

Book Review

How Arts Education Makes a Difference: Research examining successful classroom practice and pedagogy, Edited by Josephine Fleming, Robyn Gibson and Michael Anderson. London and New York: Routledge, xvii+ 301pp., £95.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781138845794.

For the most part this book is a report on an ambitious Australian project drawing on the findings of a two-year longitudinal qualitative study led by an educational psychologist, who was the principal investigator, and was supported by a team of researchers. The book results from an Australian Research Council Linkage Project grant in partnership with the Australian Council for the Arts, 2009–2011. The project attempted to study the impact of arts involvement in the academic outcomes of 643 students from 15 schools on the East Coast of Australia in an attempt to investigate what might constitute best practice in learning and teaching in the arts within primary and secondary schools in Australia. The project was entitled “The Role of Arts Education in Academic Motivation, Engagement and Achievement” (AEMEA).

In what may seem an impossible task of seeking to identify connections between arts education and engagement, motivation and achievement, the authors of the study state “a primary intention of this volume is to examine exemplary practice in arts education classrooms” (p. 1). The book looks at data collected over a four-year period for three separate studies consisting of the longitudinal study, qualitative case studies of what the authors describe as “exemplary practice” in nine classrooms in the Australian State of New South Wales and a small comparative study of international approaches to add to the reporting of “exemplary practice”.

The book is therefore a mix of components. It has a parochial focus in the main, examining Australian arts educational policy particularly surrounding the first National Curriculum for the Arts in Australian schools, Kindergarten to Year 12 (K–12). The AEMEA project was designed to attempt to fill the gap that the research team perceived in the evidence base for arts education in schools, primarily within the Australian context. Much of the book therefore reports on the funded project in some detail.

The book is divided into four sections or parts. Part I establishes the context for the AEMEA research and contains the first three chapters focussing on the Australian context. Part II, covering Chapters 4–7, introduces the use of mixed methods in the research and justifies the central research aims and findings, exploring the relationship between school, home and community arts participation and students’ academic and non-academic outcomes. Part Three discusses “successful” classroom practices within the Arts spanning Chapters 8 to 13. Part IV, covering Chapters 14–17, makes a departure in that it covers the international component of the overall project and includes researchers from Cambridge University, University of British Columbia, the National Institute of Education in Singapore and Harvard University. The purpose of these research teams was to analyse a sample of the AEMEA classroom observations using conceptual frameworks based on either arts education standards or teaching frameworks used in their own countries. Those chapters also attempt to succinctly examine arts education policies in the UK, Singapore, USA and Canada. This makes for fascinating reading and gives a more global perspective to the work. Chapter 18 provides some concluding thoughts by the book’s author-editors.

The authors proudly claim that “our research programme is a promising step forward in arts research” (p. 99). Importantly, they also acknowledge the work’s shortcomings in that data were self-reported and there is a need to explore and verify students’ arts participation experiences. From this reader’s perspective, there is some caution required when attempting to make causal links, particularly in longitudinal research studies, albeit as short as this one. Correlation is easy but causality is much more challenging. There is much that intervenes in a person’s life and therefore the simplicity in the undemanding belief that *the arts are good for you* is a matter of contention. Equally there has been much opinion voiced over the years that illuminates qualitatively the beneficial potential inherent in arts education and arts engagement. In many respects, art itself can confirm its own learning qualities, but its connectedness to the remainder of the school curriculum is always of particular interest to the fullness of student learning.

The book’s author-editors identify some “persistent themes” that arose from their research. The first theme is identified as the relationship between arts learning and creativity for the development of learning. This was a key finding of the longitudinal project that reported:

students who actively engaged in the arts also tended to be more academically engaged and motivated in other school subjects and also had higher self-esteem, higher levels of life satisfaction and a greater sense of meaning in life’ (pp. 291–92).

An interesting question identified in the research was how we might understand more deeply quality teaching in arts contexts, which I suspect is equally the same question that could be raised of any discipline. Giving definition to what constitutes “quality” or ‘successful’ can always be a challenge.

The book’s research findings suggested the need to develop a pedagogical framework designed specifically for the learning processes in arts classrooms as the study was hampered by the lack of clear criteria that made it difficult to identify certain observed creative processes. The authors also found that more research needs to be done on the nature of embodied learning. There were other areas also identified for further research that are equally interesting.

Having now read this book, I am left wondering though if we, as arts educators, are not trying to look too scientifically into an area where art can provide its own answers and those answers might be seen as no less rigorous than science might for those things which can be fully measured. No doubt, this book will produce a range of reactions from those who enthuse instrumentalist criteria as a measure through to those who find such measures an anathema in the arts.

As one might expect, turning a research report into a book is not without its difficulties. The book is therefore not a fluid read as a monograph might be. However, it will be of particular interest to Australian educationalists seeking to further understand their field and more widely to gain some starting positions for further research into classroom practice and pedagogy. International readers may want to pick up on the successes and limitations of the project in designing their further research into deeper and more critical understandings of arts learning.

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To cite this article: Ross W. Prior (2016) How arts education makes a difference: research examining successful classroom practice and pedagogy, edited by Josephine Fleming, Robyn Gibson and Michael Anderson, *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 11:4, 354-355, DOI: 10.1080/1554480X.2016.1226687

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1554480X.2016.1226687>